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SUBJECT: REGIONALISM TRIUMPHS OVER LOGIC IN CHOICE OF
TLEMCEN AS "ISLAMIC CAPITAL"

Classified By: DCM Thomas F. Daughton; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: The August 24 proclamation by Minister of Culture Khalida Toumi that Tlemcen will be the 2011 "Islamic Capital" was met with widespread cynicism, and appeared to continue a trend of western Algerian regionalism trumping common sense. Many were puzzled by the declaration, since although Tlemcen does have a proud history, its Islamic credentials pale in comparison to those of the eastern city of Constantine and other credible sites in North Africa. Since Abdelaziz Bouteflika became president in 1999, the center of gravity within the Algerian government has gradually shifted to the west. Bouteflika himself hails from the west, 12 out of 34 cabinet ministers come from Tlemcen or neighboring wilayas (provinces), and a majority of Bouteflika's advisors come from Tlemcen or his official hometown of Nedroma. Toumi's declaration, which came with the blessing of UNESCO, also caused many to groan after two previous cultural expositions turned into well publicized and allegedly corrupt fiascos: Algiers as 2007 Cultural Capital of the Arab World, and the 2003 "Year of Algeria" exposition in France. Those events, contacts say, cost loads of money, were mismanaged and brought Algeria little tangible return.
END SUMMARY.

REGIONALISM REIGNS SUPREME

2. (C) To Algerian analysts, the planned Tlemcen expo reeks of politics. Fatma Oussedik, a sociologist at the Center for Research in Economy Applied to Development (CREAD), told us on September 1 that Tlemcen, "while a nice little city, has benefited from special treatment ever since Bouteflika came to power." Voicing what is obvious to most of the population, she said that the trend over the past 15 years has been a deliberate shift in the center of power, to the point that many Algerians say today that a "Tlemcen gang" runs the country. Oussedik recalled the 1980s and 1990s influence wielded by the "BTS Triangle" -- a group of civilian and military officials hailing from the eastern region bordered by Batna, Tebessa and Souk Ahras -- and said that beginning in the late 1990s, rival clans from the far west sought to wrest control of the country away from the BTS group. The most extreme examples of this, Oussedik said, have occurred since 1999 when Bouteflika took office, and include the ouster of Bouteflika rival Ali Benflis in 2004, as well as the gradual strategic replacement of BTS civilian and military leaders with Bouteflika loyalists from the Tlemcen area.

THE 5.4 BILLION DINAR EXPO

13. (C) Throughout 2007, Algiers was festooned with posters trumpeting the city as "Cultural Capital of the Arab World." According to El Watan journalist Salima Tlemcani, 1246 books were published during the exposition, 18 festivals were organized and 40 seminars were held. Although the total cost of the 2007 expo was 5.4 billion dinars (approximately USD 88.5 million), there was no obvious central venue and many of the events were poorly publicized and managed. According to Tlemcani, most Algiers residents consequently viewed the expo as "a fortune spent on an invisible event." Tlemcani went on to say that she and her colleagues were surprised to see, after all the criticism leveled at Culture Minister Toumi for the expo, that Toumi was now embarking on "another journey of the same kind." Mammour Farah, a journalist at French-language daily Le Soir d'Algerie, noted that the debacle surrounding the 2007 expo had "reopened the wounds" of the 2003 Year of Algeria exposition in France. Farah told us that Algerians were shocked to read that the 2003 expo cost 900 million dinar (approx. USD 14.8 million), while only "a tenth of the exhibitions were real attractions."

TLEMCEN OVERREACHES

14. (C) According to University of Algiers history professor Daho Djerbal, the relative merits of Tlemcen's Islamic heritage do not justify its choice as a capital of the Islamic world. Constantine, he pointed out, is the center of Islam in Algeria, the seat of Algeria's ulema (Muslim

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scholars), and was once the capital of the entire Maghreb, a rival of Rome. Tlemcen, in contrast, has a more muted Islamic history: its status as the capital of a small kingdom from the 12th to the 15th centuries gives it, in Djerbal's view, legitimate historical credibility more than Islamic importance. Commenting on Toumi's assertion that Tlemcen "had the infrastructure" to handle an international exposition, Djerbal scoffed and asserted there was no substantive difference between the meager infrastructure of Tlemcen and that of Constantine. Historian Sekfali Abderrahim shared that view, accusing Toumi of "overreaching" by expecting to showcase Tlemcen as a "jewel of Islamic culture" by 2011. Toumi's public announcement featured her intention to transform the Mansourah Palace in Tlemcen into a replica of the Alhambra palace in Spain -- by 2011. Tlemcen, Abderrahim said, was capable of hosting an international seminar, but branding it an Islamic capital in the face of sites in Egypt, Morocco, Syria and the Arabian Peninsula with far stronger Islamic credentials was "bizarre."

COMMENT: THE TLEMCEN GANG

15. (C) The creeping domination of Algerian political life by a clannish group of officials from western Algeria is very real, the subject of cynical wisecracks and political cartoons. Opposition leader Said Sadi of the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD) has repeatedly described to us the "Tikritization" of Algeria, comparing the dominance of a group of leaders from the confined western region to the situation in Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Today, 12 out of 34 cabinet ministers hail from Bouteflika's home region of Tlemcen or from neighboring regions such as Oran, or have strong ties to western Algeria and towns across the border in Morocco. The list includes several of the most powerful ministers, whom Bouteflika appears to trust and rely on more than others: Energy Minister Chekib Khelil is a native of Oran, for example, and Interior Minister Nouredine Yazid Zerhouni joined the National Liberation Front (FLN) in northeastern Morocco in the late 1950s, alongside Bouteflika. In addition to what our contacts describe as the blatant regionalism behind the Tlemcen 2011 effort, they look at Toumi's past two major debacles and simply do not believe she

is up to the task. Abderrahim the historian recalled a 2006 visit to Aleppo, Syria (then the "capital" of the Islamic world), during which he was struck by the grandiose nature of that city's presentation. "I doubt our Minister of Culture can handle such standards," he concluded.

PEARCE